

© *Journal of International Students*
Volume 9, Issue 4 (2019), pp. 1056-1074
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
Doi: 10.32674/jis.v9i4.343
ojed.org/jis

Social Support and Stress-Related Acculturative Experiences of an English-speaking Afro-Caribbean Female Student in U.S. Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This two-year qualitative single critical case study research investigated the stress-related adjustment experiences and academic progression of a female English-speaking Afro-Caribbean collegian in an American postsecondary institution through the lens of the “triple bind” phenomenon and the stress buffer hypothesis. Student development theory and research on college student outcomes have largely focused on Black students’ experiences and achievement outcomes through a homogeneous African American cultural lens. Minimal existing research has shown differences in the lived experiences and achievement outcomes between Afro-Caribbean students and domestic African American students in U.S. postsecondary education.

Keywords: acculturation, Afro-Caribbean, international students, social support, stress

The beginning of a Ph.D. program marks one of the most important yet stressful transitions in the life of novice scholars, especially international doctoral students. Empirical studies spanning several decades support the position that stress linked to relocation, employment-related responsibilities, finances, and social isolation provides fertile ground for the onset of emotional disorders and health-related issues (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hawlery, 2003; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004; Lovitts, 2001). In addition, the Committee on the College Student (2000) acknowledged that students in doctoral programs “face enormous demands upon their time, energy, intelligence, endurance, patience, and organizational skills” (p. 1). Transitioning to another country for doctoral studies introduces an added layer of complexity and stress to international students’ educational progression.

Several studies have focused on the major life change experiences of international collegians and interconnections to social network construction and academic progression (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Mitchell, Greenwood, & Guglielmi, 2007; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Yoon & Portman, 2004; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005; Zhou, Zhang, & Stodolska, 2018). Furthermore, some researchers have discussed migration and the development of social networks among immigrants (Faist, 2000; Gold, 2001; Waldinger, 2004, 2008). Therefore, social networks hold implications for processes of acculturation or assimilation (Chelpi-den Hamer & Mazzucato, 2010; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Previous studies have found linkages among internationalization, culture, and social network development (Bilecen, 2014; Pachucki & Breiger, 2010), but these studies have not included Afro-Caribbean women in the participant groups.

The Institute of International Education, in its 2017 *Open Doors on International Educational Exchange* report, stated that in 2016–2017 academic year, total international student enrollment in institutions of higher education in the United States numbered 1,078,822. Of this aggregate, 11,351 (a 2.8% increase over the previous year) were international students from the Caribbean, with the majority from the English-speaking Caribbean coming from Jamaica (2,797), the Bahamas (2,252) and Trinidad and Tobago (1,304). Yet, little is known about this population's stress-management techniques in postsecondary education. Few studies of any methodology has investigated and analyzed the stress-coping strategies of English-speaking Afro-Caribbean females matriculating through doctoral graduate programs in the United States (Alfred, 2003). This scholarly omission indicates a need for focused studies on Afro-Caribbean women.

Understanding how female English-speaking Afro-Caribbean women, in particular, successfully navigate high-stress episodes, given their enrollment in postsecondary programs is vital. The remainder of this article is divided into five sections. The first section briefly examines the corpus of literature on stress and social support networks. The second section investigates the effects of stress and the use of social support networks by a female Afro-Caribbean student in a doctoral program in a research institution in the Southern United States. The third section provides the study's findings followed by the discussion in the fourth section. The conclusions section completes the research report.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Female Afro-Caribbean students in postsecondary education in the United States encounter the same oppression as African American students with the added dimension in America of being foreign born (Asher, 2010)—they are Black women experiencing minoritization as international students in American postsecondary institutions. Asher (2010) candidly observed that “Confronting the ‘triple threat’ of being foreign-born, female, and non-White can be a daunting task” (p. 534). Encountering the effects of this “triple bind” daily at American postsecondary institutions is both intimidating and stressful. Female Afro-Caribbean doctoral students who successfully navigate higher education must develop processes for managing the overwhelming stress.

Students experience stress related to scarcity, including food insecurity, sleeplessness, anxiety, and fear of failure. For Black students matriculating in predominantly White institutions in particular, racism and impostor syndrome (Esping, 2010; Harper, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008) add to these stresses. The ways in which students manage stress are associated with their levels of persistence or attrition (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hawlery, 2003; Lovitts, 2001). Further research has revealed that stress impairs both psychological and physical wellbeing (Schnurr & Green, 2004; Thoits, 2010), but social support networks have been shown to mitigate these negative effects.

Available research suggests a causal relationship between social support networks and wellbeing (Cohen & Syme, 1985; Fernández González, González Hernández, & Trianes Torres, 2015; Shavitt et al., 2016). Social support networks are assistive structures constructed within and dependent upon proximal and distal relationship ties that have been widely researched by social science researchers (Song, Son, & Lin, 2011). Several studies have identified that students manage academic stress by accessing social networks during high-stress episodes (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Dirks & Metts, 2010; Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007). The members of social support networks may include family, friends, cohort members, coworkers, and professional counselors (Kelly, 2005). Students therefore create networks of practical, emotional, and professional support (Campos, Yim, & Busse, 2018; Thomas, 2016).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research project investigated the influence of acculturative stress and social support networks through the theoretical lens of the “stress buffer” hypothesis, a four-category typology of social support networks advanced by Cohen and Wills (1985). The researchers hypothesized that social support networks protect (buffer) people from the negative influences of stressful events (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Stress occurred after people determined that situations were “threatening or otherwise demanding” (p. 312) and they realized that they did not have “an appropriate coping response” (p. 312). Further, the negative effects of stress were substantially increased when multiple stressors amassed. People with high stress levels and low social support levels experienced fewer buffering effects and had a greater likelihood of illnesses.

When individuals perceive events as stressful, they often experience feelings of helplessness that increasingly threaten their self-esteem. One of the four categories named by Cohen and Willis (1985), Esteem (or Emotional) Support, restores a sense of control over stressful circumstances and reassures individuals that they are valued for their inherent worth rather than personality traits or character failings. Secondly, Informational Support, or cognitive guidance, helps with deconstructing, comprehending, and managing stress-related events. Individuals alter their perceptions of stressful situations and are subsequently able to perceive stressful experiences as benign and manageable through counternarratives offered in information-based support networks.

Third, Social Companionship Support, also called belongingness or diffuse support, alleviates social isolation, provides connection and relationships with others, and distracts people under stress from obsessing about problems. Instrumental Support, or aid, provides financial, material, and services support that resolve or reduce stress-related events. Affected individuals thus have time to relax or engage in social interactions with others.

Fourth, Instrumental Support Networks are most effective when the resources provided are directly associated with the source of stress (e.g., a student experiencing food insecurity benefits most from financial support rather than social interactions with friends). The four types of support networks work interdependently to interrupt the stress-to-illness causal chain at two points, resulting in a sense of wellbeing. Each stress-related event elicits distinctive coping mechanisms based on the impact of the stressor.

The current research project is grounded in the stress buffer hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985) and answers the question: What are the social support networks that work to mitigate stress-related acculturative experiences for a female English-speaking Afro-Caribbean student at a predominantly White research institution in the Southern United States?

Two sub-questions allow a more nuanced exploration of an English-speaking Afro-Caribbean woman's academic progression and the construction of stress-coping strategies through social network construction:

1. What are the stress-related experiences of an Afro-Caribbean female student in graduate courses at this institution?
2. How does she describe and interpret the intersections of race, gender, social class, and national origin in the creation of social support networks?

I move next to the research study design and rationale for using a qualitative single critical case study approach. Afterward, I present my data analysis approaches, and provide the strategies I used for validating the findings.

METHODS

Rationale for Qualitative Single Critical Case Study Research Design

I conducted this project using qualitative single critical case study research design principles as defined by Patton (2002) and Flyvbjerg (2001). Researchers have effectively used case study approaches for examining subjects within their real-life contexts (Eisenhardt, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1981), where sometimes the boundaries between subjects and contexts are not clearly defined (Yin, 1981). Case studies, therefore, have become particularly useful when it is important to separate the person (or the subject) from the context, yet investigate the relationship between the two. Similarly, in this study a qualitative single critical case study approach provides the means to more fully understand the “bounded system,” (Merriam, 2009, p. 40)—that of an English-speaking Afro-Caribbean woman—while gaining greater

insight into the context (Emory & Cooper, 1991; Stake, 1978; Yin, 2009)—the stress-filled environment of U.S. postsecondary education.

Several researchers have effectively used single critical case study design in qualitative research or have become proponents of the methodology despite contestation (Schofield, 2000; Stake, 1982; Tripp, 1985). In fact, noted qualitative researcher Flyvbjerg addressed the use of single case study research in this way:

One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement to other methods. But formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas “the force—of example” is underestimated. (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 425)

Furthermore, Yin (2009), in explaining the difference between the goals of analytical generalization (critical case study) and statistical generalization provided justification for the use of critical case studies. Yin (2009) stated:

A ... common concern about case studies is that they provide little basis for scientific generalization. "How can you generalize from a single case?" is a frequently heard question. ...The short answer is that case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study, like the experiment, does not represent a "sample," and in doing a case study, your goal will be to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization). (p. 15).

Critical case study in the current project requires analytical generalization, i.e., generalization to the previously developed theory of stress buffering not to a population of Afro-Caribbean women. The findings, however, may hold additional implication beyond the theory. The respondent represented a critical case as she was one of only two Afro-Caribbean women at the site of the study and she was the only one who consented to the 2-year study. One participant was therefore considered appropriate as the research was exploratory and the research questions sought depth and detail about the theory of acculturation, stress, and social support networks rather than normative data. The participant’s experiences provide “the force—of example” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 425) in a critical case because so few research studies have focused exclusively on Afro-Caribbean women.

Sampling and Confidentiality

I conducted a 2-year qualitative single critical case study project using purposeful criterion sampling. Patton (1999) described purposeful criterion sampling as a way “to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance. Criterion sampling are routinely identified for in-depth, qualitative analysis” (p. 176). In that vein, I employed purposeful sampling of a female Afro-Caribbean doctoral student at a Southern university in the United States to address the research questions. The participant completed all postsecondary education as an international student and completed a master’s degree at the same institution where she was currently enrolled

in the doctoral program. The participant, who I refer to as Michelle, provided informed consent and I removed all identifying information from transcript data to protect her identity. Names of faculty and other graduate students mentioned by the participant were changed to protect identities.

Data Collection

I collected field observations, digital recordings of interviews, and digital photographs for 2 years. I used the triangulation of data to support and enhance the validity of the findings (Patton, 1999). Instead of charting brief answers on a Likert-type scale, I listened to the participant's stories, observed interactions in classroom settings using an observation protocol (Barbour, 2007; Liamputtong, 2009), and asked clarifying questions in interviews based on those observations. Interview questions focused on acculturative stress, race, gender, nationality, and relationships with peers and the institution. I recorded responses to interview questions and a professional transcriptionist prepared transcripts for coding. I gathered field notes on the student's interaction with faculty and peers during multiple classroom observations. Additionally, I took pictures of the classroom layout and ongoing activities to analyze the subject's participation in class and interaction with classmates.

Data Analysis

I analyzed all data abductively, i.e., deductively and inductively, using first open then selective coding. I analyzed the data deductively using a priori social support network constructs described by Cohen and Wills (1985). Then, I open-coded transcripts for key words and concepts from additional social support network theories. Next, I analyzed the data inductively allowing new categories to emerge from data. One example of an emergent new category was social media. Additionally, I made meticulous notes on insights and impressions (Moustakas, 1994) as I read the interview transcripts. I used analytical memoing in this project to further identify salient or interesting themes in the data. Analytic memos are brief written records that describe the products of the analyses of emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). A combination of 30 patterns, exceptions, and unique themes emerged from the extensive coding of the transcript data. I presented initial findings to the department faculty members who acted as devil's advocates, intentionally challenging and critiquing conclusions I drew from the findings. Finally, I uploaded transcript data in the form of Microsoft Word documents into NVivo 10 software and recoded and reorganized the data to further clarify patterns and themes.

Strategies for Validating Findings

I collected classroom (field) observations, interviews, and pictures as triangulated data for the study (Patton, 2002). I sent transcript data to the participant to confirm the accuracy of the transcript text (member-checking). I also provided audio files and working interpretations and analysis of the text to the respondent to

establish referential adequacy (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Two faculty members acting as devil's advocates were an additional resource to establish trustworthiness (Patton, 2002). The faculty rigorously questioned my interpretations and provided critiques and feedback for document revisions in debriefing sessions.

FINDINGS

The first major finding of this research study was that the participant, Michelle, experienced multiple stressors during the first year of a doctoral program and she contemplated dropping out of her program. Stressors included relocation, health issues, and social isolation. The second major finding was that the participant accessed and, in some instances, constructed social support networks that included friends and professional services to mediate on- and off-campus stressors encountered during the first year of her doctoral program. Existing and emerging social support networks became valued systems of encouragement, collaboration, and assistance.

I have organized the findings around two broad headings, Stress-Related Acculturative Experiences and Support Networks, with subheadings for additional clarity to support the reader's understanding of the respondent's experiences. In most cases, I have included extended excerpts from the participant's responses rather than short snippets as is common in some qualitative studies because the responses provide the rich context so important in case study research. I present the respondent as the primary interpreter of her experiences to reduce the instances of reinterpreting her already interpreted recollections.

Stress-Related Acculturative Experiences—All the Stuff Running Through the Back of Your Mind

Relocation and Separation from Family as a Source of Stress

Afro-Caribbean students are situated in liminal spaces, navigating the tension between the "there and then" of home and the "here and now" (Waldinger, 2008) of the university campus. Michelle, an Afro-Caribbean female graduate student, was particularly affected by her recent relocation to the United States. Moving to a new environment and separation from direct family support brought on feelings of stress. Michelle reflected:

So, when I left [my country] last August, I remember laying [sic] in bed with my mother the night before I left and actually crying. She was like, "Why are you getting upset, what's wrong?" And I was like, "I don't want anything to happen to you when I'm not here." So, it was my biggest fear. I'm 44. My parents are well in their 70s. They're not getting any younger and that was one of my major fears is that I'm far away from them. I can get there within a day, but I wouldn't be there if something major happened. I have a sibling, I have a brother, but he doesn't handle that kind of stuff well. So, I know if anything happens, and when my parents get older, that they will be my responsibility.

The concern about her parents' well-being was a source of emotional tension for Michelle. Her family did not understand her decision to pursue doctoral studies. She lamented "I don't feel like they really understand". Her family kept asking: "Why the heck are you still in school? What are you doing?"

Social Isolation as a Source of Stress

Michelle's institution was predominantly White and this demographic reality imposed limitations on opportunities for network building because of Michelle's prior cultural socialization. Michelle was part of the racial majority in her country and had few instances to socially interact with White people in her native cultural context. Michelle described her former racial background like this:

Interestingly enough, in [my country] I've had no friends outside of my race except for a classmate when I was at secondary school. That in itself was interesting because White people and Black people in [my country] do not socialize together. So maybe we'd hang out at school or get together sometimes after school to work on something, but we definitely wouldn't share the same social circles.

Social isolation was, therefore, a concern for Michelle at the beginning of her program. She described her academic context and some of the ways in which she felt socially isolated. The experience of cultural homogenization was especially bothersome for her. Michelle disclosed:

I know that the institution really ... I think it's welcoming to international students. They have [a space] and they have their programs and activities that celebrate differences on people's countries and cultures and traditions, but I still do think that international students are seen beyond that as a homogenous group. Unless I go out of my way to interact with those programs then I really don't see anyone outside of my program and department which is a little insular.

Stereotypes and Racism as a Source of Stress

In addition to cultural homogenization in institutional programming, Michelle experienced minoritization, the exchange of dominant status for minority status, the moment she flew into the United States. During interviews, she revealed that her upbringing and socio-political experiences were different from those of African Americans in part because she was a member of the dominant racial and political group at home. She did not have the minority orientation expected of her in the United States because she was Black. Michelle explained:

When asked for my ... on those forms where they ask you, what is your race and what is your ethnicity, I am Black, Caribbean. I'm not African American. I'm Black Caribbean. So, if African American is on the form, I won't check that. If it says Black/African American, then I'll check it. My Caribbeanness—I think I just made up a word—is very essential to my

identity. Like I said, I think I have self-confidence, I know what my people are capable of. We run our own country, there's no position in society that is not attainable for me, so a lot of those issues I think that really affects Black Canadians and Americans is an issue that I can't relate to. It's not my experience.

Furthermore, Black international students are sometimes confronted for the first time with racial aggression or microaggression at their institutions and in their community. Asked whether she had experienced racialized episodes during her Ph.D. matriculation, Michelle said:

I have. The most recent one... at the [event] this week where we had someone come up to us and ask if, so you do go to [an HBCU]. I mean, it's a [South University] event, everybody there is from [South University], so I don't know where this assumption was that we were from [an HBCU].

Michelle was concerned about campus climate and a diminished sense of belonging at her institution. Additionally, she was distressed because of the racism in the wider community. As a result, she vacillated about her future professional plans. She was unsure about staying in the United States after graduation because of the racial tensions in America. Michelle shared about her uncertainty and why she was reconsidering a professional career in the United States in this way:

I remember when the ... was it Ferguson? I remember saying on Twitter that I don't feel welcome here. As a country, I don't feel that I'm welcomed here. I don't feel unwelcome at [South University], I don't feel unwelcome at [my academic department], but before, when I did my master's, I'd wanted to stay in the US. My plan was to stay in the US, have my career and retire back to [my country]. Why would I want to live in a country that treats Black people this way when I could be home where I don't have these issues, where this is not an issue for me.

Michelle experienced the same racial tensions as African Americans in the United States with the additional complexity of being foreign born. While Michelle could be mistaken for an African American as she moved about the campus and the community, the moment she spoke, her international status became apparent and differentiated her from African Americans. This differentiation also became a source of stress.

Health-Related Issues as a Source of Stress

In an ongoing highly stressful experience, Michelle's symptoms first erupted with a breast cancer scare. She experienced high and frequent episodes of anxiety in the interval between identification of a lump and the subsequent diagnosis. She talked about the episode like this:

In January, I went for my first mammogram after putting it off for a while and I got called back for a second mammogram and then an ultrasound. And then they decided that they found something that they needed to

biopsy. So, that got me really concerned. I have an aunt who had been diagnosed with breast cancer and I'd had a biopsy on that same breast before, so I was totally freaked out. I'm also terrified of needles, so that didn't help. So that was a two-month process at the beginning of the second semester that I had to be dealing with and it really caused a lot of anxiety for me.

She subsequently received word that her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. In fact, cancer was to play a recurring role in Michelle's mother's life and the psychological and physical stress took on a toll on Michelle's psyche. She reported:

Once I'd gotten past that and found out that that was benign and not an issue, then I found out that my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer so that really threw me for a loop. That was towards the end of the semester. That was also difficult and dealing with that during the summer as well. Because my mother, she's retired now but she is the nurturer of the family. She takes care of everybody and I felt almost like a failure as a daughter. That the one time my mother needs somebody to take care of her, that I wasn't physically able to be there to be her source of comfort and support.

Financial Precariousness as a Source of Stress

The United States remains the destination of choice for international students. Yet studying in the United States can be one of the most expensive choices international students make. American students have a number of federal and institutional financial aid mechanisms available to assist with the cost of postsecondary education. International students have far fewer options. Michelle described how the decision to pursue a Ph.D. impacted her professional and financial status. She said:

Choosing to put my consulting career on pause and use my savings to meet my financial obligations has been difficult. Because I choose not to incur any debt during my doctoral studies, my GRA stipend is now my sole source of income. Initially I had planned to stay with friends, but their family expanded, and it became necessary to move out and find a place to live and paying rent that I hadn't planned for.

The Influence of Stress on Work and Academic Production

Findings indicate that as health and emotional concerns multiplied, stress levels rose, and Michelle's work and academic production suffered. She recounted, "There were major assignments that I wasn't able to finish, so I have a couple incompletes." Sleep deprivation is common among doctoral students and this phenomenon eventually transpired for Michelle as well, resulting in more stress and a diminished productive capacity. She disclosed:

I was having serious insomnia, so I would sleep for three hours at night maximum and I would do that for four nights in a row and then I would

crash for 12 hours and that went on for a week or two, and I realized I couldn't keep that up. So being sleep deprived, that doesn't help on your focus or concentration to sit in or to write a paper or to read. You have all this stuff running in the back of your mind and then trying to fall asleep at night, your brain is just not shutting off.

Stress Leads to Thoughts of Attrition

As sustained, multiple stressors act on doctoral students as they progress through programs (Cahir & Morris, 1991), the likelihood that they will attrite increases (Lovitts, 2001). Multiple and persistent sources of stress ultimately led Michelle to consider dropping out of the doctoral program. She revealed, "I was having panic attacks, having major anxiety. And the last time I returned home, I was convinced that that was it, I was not going to be leaving again."

Social Support Networks—It Takes a Village

Michelle revealed that she had constructed social support networks that encouraged her and increased the likelihood that she would persevere and succeed in the doctoral program. In the absence of her biological family, Michelle valued a relationship with a small group of friends she now considered family. She divulged:

I am a loner and I've realized there's no way that I can do this [doctoral studies] maintaining that loner status. It's a difficult process and you will need people to help you limp across the finish line. I think I've created another circle, my doc circle. We actually call ourselves La Familia. I think, obviously with my own efforts plus the support of them I think will help me finish this thing.

Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Esteem Support

When asked about the role that race, gender, and social class play in the construction of her social support network, Michelle admitted that she forms deeper connections with people who share her race. Michelle responded:

I've had relationships with people outside of my race, not a lot of them and they definitely are never as deep as they are with people who are the same race as me. In my program, how many ... is it just the two of us there? So, there are two Black people in my cohort for my doc program ... and Denise ... well, people of color. We have two people who are Indian.

Constructing support systems amongst friends who share similar racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds was important to Michelle. She connected with a new friend in the doctoral program who had a similar upbringing and cultural experiences. During one of her interviews Michelle said this:

I have a great office mate, classmate, who's also from the Caribbean. One of the concerns I also had when I was starting my grad program was like,

oh my God, I'm going to be the oldest person there, it's terrible. How am I going to relate to these people? They're going to be so much younger than me? And then I saw on the Facebook group before I started in August that there was somebody else from the Caribbean, so again I wouldn't be the only international student. During my master's program, also, at [South University], I was the only international student in the program which made 9-11 very interesting. I really identified with Kayla, we're a similar age, we're from the Caribbean growing up in a Black majority country so there's a lot of things that we have in common, and have also done higher education in the US and away from home. So, we really connected.

While the data revealed that Michelle preferred relationships with people from her own racial background, and this was also evidenced by the differences in her interactions during group work with Black and White classmates—she did establish connections with students of other races to reach mutual goals. She specified:

My most recent professional experience would have been in [my country] and I've had very little exposure to people outside of my race in [my country] professionally. Academically ... in my first semester, I ended up in [quantitative methods class]. So, it was me and two other first years, they're both White males, and we decided if we were going to make it through this thing that we would have to do it together. We actually had a regular Sunday study group at a library and we worked really well together. Whether we would socialize outside of that? Probably not. Probably that's more of a cultural thing in that we don't really share a lot in common outside of school.

Professional Counselors as a Source of Informational Support

Mental health support is crucial to graduate student success (Committee on the College Student, 2000; Mitchell et al., 2007). On Michelle's campus formal structures exist to support students' mental health needs. When Michelle became overwhelmed by stressors, she eventually accessed the professional services provided by her institution and this became a part of her formal social support network. She disclosed how the counseling staff helped her with her immediate psychological and physical concerns. Michelle told me:

Eventually I did go to the counseling center and they gave me something for anxiety and something to help me sleep, so at least that covered the physical issues but then there was still the emotional stuff about being away from my mom and trying to be an emotional support for her while not letting her know that this [mom's breast cancer diagnosis] really, really shattered me. It really did.

Peer Interactions as a Source of Social Companionship Support

Social isolation has been shown to be a stressor for graduate students. Friends serve as a gauge by which people determine who they are or are not, and can be

sounding boards and support systems as people change and try on new identities (Bilecen, 2014; Kelly, 2005; Waldinger, 2004). Peer interactions can be informal support systems outside the university walls and offer a chance to unwind, relax, and socialize. Michelle indicated:

I also have a very close friend from back home. I've known her since I was 11 years old, who lives here [city in southeast, United States], has her family here, so they're like my surrogate family. I think my connection with my friends and my family is what makes me rich. There are friends that I could call on in the middle of the night and they would be there for me.

Social Media as a Channel of Social Companionship Support

Some immigrants to the United States construct geographically and politically borderless transnational social networks (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994; Waldinger & Duquette-Rury, 2016) because of increased global internet capacity and the pervasiveness of social media platforms (Hossain & Veenstra, 2017; Keles, 2016). Social media sites provided a stable mechanism for Michelle to continue these vital relationships. She said "I'm also still very much in contact with my friends back home. We use WhatsApp; I talk to my friends almost every day so they're still very much there."

Friends and Family as a Source of Financial/Instrumental Support

International students often leave well-developed careers behind when they decide to pursue graduate studies in the United States. This decision has far-reaching effects because financial obligations may continue unabated in their native countries while they matriculate abroad. Michelle detailed financial issues that arose and the ways in which her social networks, including her parents, supported her. She articulated her experiences like this:

I have the use of my friend's car and just have to maintain it and put gas in it. It has made my life exceedingly easier as quite a few of my classes end late at night. Without their generosity I'd be at the mercy of the local bus system to get around. My parents have also been generous even though I take their help with great reluctance. They give me an airline ticket home each Christmas as my gift and are currently helping me with my mortgage back home as my savings ran short before I'd planned. For conference travel, I've applied for every possible financial assistance offered by the department, college, [other institutional funding source], and even the association whose conference I'll be attending. It really takes a village to get through and finish a doctoral degree.

In summary, the data revealed that while Michelle encountered multiple stressors that drove her to consider attrition, she accessed and, in some instances, constructed various social support networks comprised of friends and professional services. Social support networks served to mitigate the effects of on- and off-campus stressors during the first year of her doctoral program. According to Michelle, existing and

developing social support networks became valued systems of encouragement, collaboration, and assistance. In the next section I discuss the findings and their congruence or incongruence with Cohen and Wills' stress buffer hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

This research study investigated the stress-related adjustment experiences, construction of social support networks, and academic progression of an Afro-Caribbean woman at a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the United States through the lens of the triple bind phenomenon and the stress buffer hypothesis. Some of the stress-related experiences described in this project were unique to Michelle because she is a female, Black international student. Michelle's minoritization experience is a phenomenon different from that of African American students (Asher, 2010). While African American students move in and out of majority contexts, their larger ever-present environment in the United States is as minorities in a White majority country (Harper, 2013). Michelle's cultural and socio-political background was different (Asher, 2010). She has been surrounded by Blackness for most of her life and interactions with Whiteness were few. Her friendship with Kayla, in particular, moderated the minoritization experience and provided Esteem Support. Michelle's culture and difference was shared by and through Kayla in a co-constitutive and co-evolving understanding of what it means to be an Afro-Caribbean woman in U.S. postsecondary education. Michelle's experiences, especially those associated with minoritization and race, suggest that researchers should and could adjust their perceptions of "minorities," a term Michelle rejects, when considering diversity projects (Harper, 2013).

Michelle also described financial challenges especially during her first year and received some financial support that helped her through a difficult time. This type of support is captured in Cohen and Wills' Instrumental Support. Not many studies of any methodology have investigated international students' experiences with U.S. institution-based financial aid or financial precariousness similar to the study of college costs for American domestic students by Sara Goldrick-Rab (2016). Such an omission is a problem given the importance of international students' contribution to diversity of thought and cultural perspective in the U.S. postsecondary enterprise. Persistence and retention efforts should include recognition of the possibility of various forms of postenrollment precarity.

Undoubtedly, students must be agentic in creating networks of support but even at the Ph.D. level it would be a mistake to assume that international students in the United States intuitively know how to do this well. Michelle accessed counseling services, and therefore Informational Support at her institution, when she recognized that she was experiencing mental health challenges. However, were the counselors at her campus knowledgeable about the tension of responsibility and loyalty to the "there and then" even as students navigate the "here and now" in U.S. higher education (Mitchell et al., 2007; Waldinger, 2004, 2008)?

As predicted by Cohen and Wills' (1985) Social Companionship category, Michelle's friendships buffered feelings of isolation. However, Michelle's preference to socialize with Black students presents a numerical challenge at PWIs where Black

students frequently report being the only Black student in classes (Esping, 2010; Harper, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008). Student programming should be designed to teach students how to traverse cultural divides. Transnational friendships (Bilecen, 2014; Pachucki & Breiger, 2010) forged across racial boundaries can provide support during times of distress and isolation before academic downward spirals occur.

Finally, aligning with literature (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hawlery, 2003; Lovitts, 2001) Michelle's academic progression stood in jeopardy because of several incomplete and failing grades at the conclusion of this study. Her capacity to persist and eventually graduate came into question. Yet, she was a very able student as evidenced by grades in coursework prior to the onset of health symptoms (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Schnurr & Green, 2004; Thoits, 2010). The ability/capability disjuncture should alert stakeholders that stressors have an adverse influence on student progress.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have explored the groundwork for a larger, mixed-methods study on female English-speaking Afro-Caribbean students and the connection between their socio-cultural and psychological adjustment patterns and achievement outcomes in U.S. postsecondary education. Stress-related factors associated with adjustment to university life, academic expectations, and the temporary (for some) minoritization of status in U.S. society led Michelle to consider attrition. To fully support international students, particularly female English-speaking Afro-Caribbean students, scholars must scrutinize the oppressive systems that envelop these students, who are already tackling demanding doctoral programs. In particular, I suggest studying tuition and fees, financial aid processes, as well as food and housing insecurity through an international student lens. Research on female English-speaking Afro-Caribbean students who successfully navigate contradictory paradigms of being both insiders and outsiders of privileged systems can inform institutional decision-making that might lead to increased student retention, graduation, and successful transfer into the marketplace not only for current but for future collegians as well. Such studies would be important contributions to the corpus of literature on student development, network theory, resilience, and perseverance.

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